ROMANIZING BAAL: THE ART OF SATURN WORSHIP IN NORTH AFRICA

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with stelai from North Africa dedicated to Baal / Saturn in fulfilment of a religious vow, and examines the development of their iconography as the region was incorporated into the Roman empire. The monuments in question range in date from the second century B. C. until the fourth century A.D., and are found throughout modern Tunisia and eastern Algeria – ancient Africa Proconsularis and Numidia, but not Tripolitania. Many of the Roman-period stelai have been collected and catalogued by Marcel Leglay in his book *Saturn africain*,[1] and this paper owes much to that work. However, the Berber/ Punic stelai have been studied separately, obscuring some of the developments between them and those of the Roman period. Considerations of space prevent full illustration here of all the examples discussed, and the reader is referred to Leglay's study for pictures of many of the stelai.

A difficulty with the study of the stelai is the poor chronological data available; they are usually from old or poorly-controlled excavations. Dating the monuments is therefore difficult, and relies usually on a combination of onomastics, features of dress and hairstyle, and artistic 'style' – the latter an unreliable indicator in what is largely a naïve and schematic mode of representation. Nevertheless, some are dated by consular references, and others with more or less precision by their archaeological context.[2] These enable a seriation in which developments in artistic style, composition, cult objects and the formula of the inscription can be traced. In the following, a distinction should be be kept in mind between artistic or stylistic changes, which might be signalled through a shift in representation or in visual language; and changes in religious practice evidenced by the appearance of new or different forms of ritual equipment, offerings, or the attitude in which the dedicant is represented.

Punic and Berber stelai dedicated to Baal

The basic elements of the Saturn stelai of the Roman period are already present on Punic/Berber stelai of the pre-Roman period. The pre-Roman stelai dedicated to Baal consist of a representation of the dedicant, usually with arms raised and either holding offerings interpreted as a lozenge-shaped cake and/or a pretzel-type cake, or accompanied by various religious symbols, notably a palm branch. The deity, Baal, is usually represented by a crescent moon at the top of the stele. Sometimes a rosette or sun symbol, also of celestial significance, may appear. Many stelai are anepigraphic, but where inscriptions do appear, they are simple dedications to Baal, giving the name of the dedicant and recording that he or she has paid their vow or made a sacrifice. The visual focus of the stelai is on the dedicant, and not the deity, a feature which is unusual by comparison with other cults.

[1] M. Leglay, *Saturne Africain. Monuments*, Vol. 1, Afrique proconsulaire (Paris 1961). – M. Leglay, *Saturne Africain. Monuments*, Vol. 2, Numidie et Maurétanies (Paris 1966). – M. Leglay, *Saturne Africain. Histoire* (Paris 1966). – cf. also M. K. Orfali, *'De Baal Hammon à Saturne africain: les traces du culte en Algérie.'* In C. Sintes/Y. Rebahi (Eds.), Algérie antique. Catalogue de l'exposition 26 avril au 17 août 2003. Musée de l'Arles et de la Provence antiques (Arles 2003) 142–50.

[2] M. Leglay, *Saturne Africain. Histoire* (Paris 1966) 14–57.

The simple composition of Punic/Berber Baal stelai is well illustrated by a group from ancient Thabarbusis, modern Aïn Nechma, near Guelma in Numidia. Numerous funerary and *ex voto* stelai, including both neo-Punic dedications to Baal-Hammon and Roman dedications to Saturn, were discovered here in the 1940s and 1950s, and a temple has been identified on the hill overlooking the findspot of the stelai.[3]

The Punic/Berber stelai are uniform in composition: the dedicant is represented nude, schematically depicted with nipples, navel and genitals, and a round face with holes for the eyes and mouth (**fig. 1**). The arms are raised, and their extremities merge into the offerings (usually interpreted as cakes) which the figure is holding, without the hands being represented. In the example shown, the dedicant is flanked by a palm branch on one side, and an inscription in neo-Punic on the other. A lunar crescent, representing Baal, caps the stele. The carving is in very flat relief, almost two-dimensional, and the composition is entirely frontal.



Fig. 1 Stele to Baal with Punic inscription from Thabarbusis (Aïn Nechma), Algeria. (A. Wilson).

Roman stelai from Aïn Nechma

Fig. 2 shows a Roman period stele from the same site; remarkably little, really, has changed. The dedicant is now clothed in a tunic and mantle, and inscribes in Latin:

L. FLAVIVS DEXTER SATVRNO V(OTVM)
S(OLVIT) L(IBENS) M(ERITO).

But the flat relief, frontality and crudely naïve representation of the figure, with a disproportionately large round face and schematic features, and the attitude with raised arms merging into the objects held, remains the same. A ram is represented as sacrifice; and once again a lunar crescent surmounts the composition. Although the dedicant here bears the *tria nomina*, he could well be of African descent; the name Flavius may place him in the later first century or early second century A.D.[4]

Other Roman stelai from Aïn Nechma are closely similar, to the extent that Leglay's no. 12 from this site could well have been carved by the sculptor of the previous stele.[5] The composition is almost identical, even down to the curved double border framing the scene at the top; it differs only in that it represents a cock rather than a ram. The inscription, TILAVCA AN(imo) is an incomplete phrase, and the name Tilauca is non-Roman. This stele belongs to an early series carved in low relief with schematic features, in all of which the dedicants carry palms.[6] A second series is slightly more

[3] M. Leglay, *Saturne Africain. Monuments*, Vol. 1, Afrique proconsulaire (Paris 1961) 404.
[4] Leglay (note 3) 408 no. 13.
[5] Leglay (note 3) 408 no. 12 Pl. XV, 3. If this and no. 13 are by the same sculptor, Leglay's date for no. 12 of first century B.C. – first century A.D. needs to be revised to late first century/early second century A.D.
[6] E.g. Leglay (note 3) Pl. XV, 1–2.



Fig. 2 Roman period Saturn stele from Thabarbusis (Aïn Nechma), Algeria. (A. Wilson).

developed, with deeper relief and greater detail in the treatment of the hair, clothes and face; palm branches are replaced by bunches of grapes, but the lozenge and crown-cakes persist.[7] Roman influence on the Aïn Nechma stelai remains superficial, affecting perhaps clothes and language, but not the art or the basic religious conception behind these monuments.

Ksiba and Maktar

Progressive but still very limited Roman influence is visible in a similar series from Ksiba, in Africa Proconsularis.[8] The earlier series (Leglay 1961 Pl. XVI.1-3) remains very close to the neo-Punic tradition, although with some architectural mouldings betraying Hellenistic or Roman influence. A second series (Leglay 1961 Pl. XVI.4-8) has marginally more elaborate treatment of the clothes, and the figures are a little less schematic, with more attempt to represent facial features. They are shown framed within an aedicula, and Roman-style altars are sometimes represented (Leglay 1961 Pl. XVI.7-8), indicating some Roman influence on the ritual equipment of the cult.

Roman influence is minimal even in the second century A.D. on the stele from Maktar in Tunisia.[9] Here the orants are clothed in the manner of the Aïn Nechma or Ksiba stele, but schematically represented with massively thick necks and very crude treatment of drapery; they are placed in a simple architectural frame, but the inscriptions are still in neo-Punic, not Latin.

Stelai from coloniae and military sites

Rather different, however, are the stelai from several military sites or new colonial foundations, which betray a greater degree of Roman influence. From the vicus around the headquarters fort of the Third Legion at Lambaesis (Numidia) come numerous votive stelai of the second/third centuries A.D. The male dedicants are shown in togas, in one case holding a scroll **(Fig 3)**,[10] and often a bunch of grapes. The attitude of the figures is now different; instead of standing with raised arms, their stance is more formal and restrained, typical of Roman offering poses, sometimes with one hand making an offering on an altar. A ram is represented below, as sacrificial offering. Figures are now shown in greater, more rounded relief, and the treatment of faces, hairstyles and posture is markedly more realistic and developed than in the stelai from Aïn Nechma or Ksiba; and, within the limitations of this category of provincial art, the woman depicted in Leglay 1966 Pl. XXIV.7 even

7 Leglay (note 3) Pl. XV, 4–6.

8 Leglay (note 3) 420–30 Pl. XVI.

9 A. M. Bisi, *Le stele puniche*. Studi semitici 27 (Roma 1967) Tav. XXXV. – cf. Leglay (note 3) 242–3.

10 M. Leglay, *Saturne Africain. Monuments*, Vol. 2, Numidie et Maurétanies (Paris 1966) 103 no. 75 Pl. XXIV, 5.



FIG. 3 SATURN STELE FROM LAMBAESIS (LAMBÈSE), ALGERIA, SECOND OR THIRD CENTURY A.D., SHOWING TOGATE DEDICANT HOLDING A SCROLL AND A BUNCH OF GRAPES. (LEGLAY 1966A, PL. XXIV.5.).

achieves a certain elegance. The influence of Roman art and customs on the stelai from Lambaesis is evident, as one might perhaps expect at a major military centre. But figures are still represented frontally, just as in the stelai from elsewhere, and indeed as in Roman funerary stelai from all over the empire. Indeed, at places like Lambaesis there may be some cross-over with funerary art, the same workshops perhaps being involved in the production of votive stelai to Saturn and of grave markers.[11]

The same pattern is borne out at Timgad, the colony founded in A.D. 100 just 15 miles from Lambaesis.[12] With the exception of the simple composition of Leglay 1966a Pl. XXVII.2, which is doubtless early, and depicts only the lunar crescent symbol for Saturn and the sacrificial offerings, the second-century A.D. stelai from Timgad all show many of the indicators of Roman influence we have already identified. The focus is still on the dedicant, but the deity makes more of an appearance: Saturn is now depicted more usually as a head than as a crescent symbol. The dedicants are shown in Roman dress and in postures typical of Roman religious monuments, sometimes making offerings at altars, and framed within niches. The figures are much less two-dimensional than those of the stelai in the neo-Punic tradition. The overall composition may also become more elaborate, as in Leglay 1966a Pl. XXVII.4, with three registers – Saturn, the Sun and the Moon in upper (celestial) register. The dedicant is shown in the central register, holding a bunch of grapes and a bird, flanked by genii carrying long palms. In the lowest register a ram is led to sacrifice.

At Djemila, a colony founded in the reign of Nerva, we have a series of stelai running into the fourth century A.D. Most of the known stelai from Djemila were found re-used face-down as paving slabs for streets, and in many cases faces have been deliberately hacked off, probably in the anti-pagan Christian fervour of the mid to late fourth century. The stelai show similar trends to those from other coloniae – figures in full relief, making offerings at altars, and, significantly, couples portrayed together, sometimes with children as well.[13] The compositions recall in this respect the arrangement of family members on Roman funerary monuments, although the bearded head or bust of the deity generally presides over them. Other Roman cults may also make an appearance, as with the representation of the Dioscuri in the early fourth-century stelai.[14]

11 Leglay (note 10) 113 nos. 156–7 Pl. XXIV, 9–10 illustrates monuments of caisson design looking very like funerary markers, although Leglay insists they are dedications to Saturn.
12 Leglay (note 10) 125–61 Pl. XXVII–XXVIII.
13 Leglay (note 10) 226 no. 30 Pl. XXXIV, 3.
14 Leglay (note 10) 229 no. 36 Pl. XXXIV, 6.

Ghorfa

More elaborate stelai come from Ghorfa, between Dougga, El Kef and Maktar, in north-west Tunisia. These stelai, of the first and second centuries A.D., have a markedly more complex and crowded composition than those we have so far looked at, in several registers (**Fig. 4**). They represent the dedicant standing within a temple, rendered in some architectural detail, with the coffering of the porch rendered in flat perspective, below a pediment with sculpture. A pantheon of deities is shown in the upper part of the stele, arranged in a pyramidal composition. Other deities besides Saturn are also represented – Dionysos holding a thyrsos, and Venus. Figures are less two-dimensional, but the pose, holding an offering against the chest, is carried over from Punic tradition.

The arrangement of these stelai is clearly quite different from both the neo-Punic style and also from the stelai from the Roman colonies; the emphasis on architectural ornament, and the relatively high quality of the relief carving, may in some sense be a product of the highly urbanized region of the Tunisian Tell from which these stelai come.



Fig. 4 Saturn stelai from Ghorfa (Tunisia) – first / second centuries A.D. (Bardo Museum, Tunis.).

Discussion

This has of course been a brief and highly selective overview of a fraction of a very large group of monuments. Nevertheless, some basic trends are apparent, that may reveal insights into the ways in which Roman culture affected the populations of North Africa under Roman rule. The onomastics of the dedicants suggest that the cult of Saturn appealed in particular to the middle and lower strata of society, and the relatively unsophisticated and repetitive nature of these monuments supports this view. Many of the dedicants carry African names, or Roman names commonly borne by North Africans – Felix, Fortunatus, Iulia Vernula – and very few have the *tria nomina*. The emphasis on frontality is noted by Leglay as a feature of Romanization, since it is characteristic of Italian funerary and *ex voto* stelai of the second and first centuries B.C. but he also points out that it is present in Punic/Berber art.[15] His discussion of the Roman and African origins of frontality, though, fails to confront the idea that it may simply be a hallmark of simplistic artisan work, affordable by the lower strata of society who set up these stelai. Johns points out that features such as frontal representation, over-large heads, lentoid eyes, diagrammatic treatment of drapery – all of which are characteristics of many of the Saturn stelai – are typical of naïve art.[16] That we are dealing in some cases with artisans of limited technical ability is confirmed by the confusion of limbs with the objects they hold, or the sideways portrayal of feet belonging to a frontal figure.[17] The art of the Saturn stelai,

15 Leglay (note 2) 44–6.

16 C. Johns, *Art, romanisation and competence*. In: S. Scott/J. Webster (eds), *Roman Imperialism and Provincial Art* (Cambridge 2003) 20.

17 Leglay (note 2) 19.

then, is not elite art, nor of course the art of that sector of the population too poor to afford these monuments, but the art commissioned by a lower to middle segment of society.

In some regions, especially the sanctuary of Aïn Nemcha, Roman impact on the cult appears minimal; the figures are portrayed in the same postures as in the pre-Roman period, with the same naïve representation, and the same ritual equipment; all that has changed is that they are now clothed and speak Latin. Elsewhere, in the Roman colonies and in the more urbanized parts of Africa Proconsularis, the iconography of the stelai undergoes progressive change, reflecting changes both in artistic styles and in religious ritual. The figures become more rounded and are shown in greater relief; more detail is represented in clothing and physical features, and there are close similarities with Roman funerary art. Indeed, the most developed relief is found in stelai at the colonies of Djemila, Zana and Timgad; and at Djemila, Timgad and Lambaesis all the men wear togas.[18] At the same time, elements of the cult are transformed: the posture of the dedicants changes from the neo-Punic stance with arms raised, to a more restrained togate pose, making an offering at an altar. Some of the ritual offerings change too – the palm branches disappear and bunches of grapes are shown with greater frequency. Other deities appear from time to time in supporting roles – Dionysos, Venus and the Dioscuri. During the second century, dedications become increasingly influenced by mainstream Roman practice – they are addressed to the divinity, with his titles, then they give the name of the dedicant and the reason for the vow, and then the *ex voto* formula *v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) a(nimo)*.[19]

In contrast to the highly Romanized public architecture funded by urban elites in North Africe, the Baal/Saturn stelai suggest that the impact of Roman religion, culture and art on the middle and lower strata of society who made these offerings varied across North Africa. In some areas of Numidia it was apparently very limited and superficial, with the essential elements remaining unchanged since the Punic period and Roman influence appearing almost as a veneer of language and dress habits, but leaving artistic expression and cult practice (posture of the dedicant, ritual equipment) as it was. But at the same time, *coloniae* and military *vici* in Numidia, and centres in the highly urbanized regions of Africa Proconsularis, exhibit a much greater degree of cultural assimilation both of Roman artistic styles and of religious habits and cult practices into the iconography of the Saturn cult.

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[18] Leglay (note 2) 19, 23.
[19] Leglay (note 2) 31.